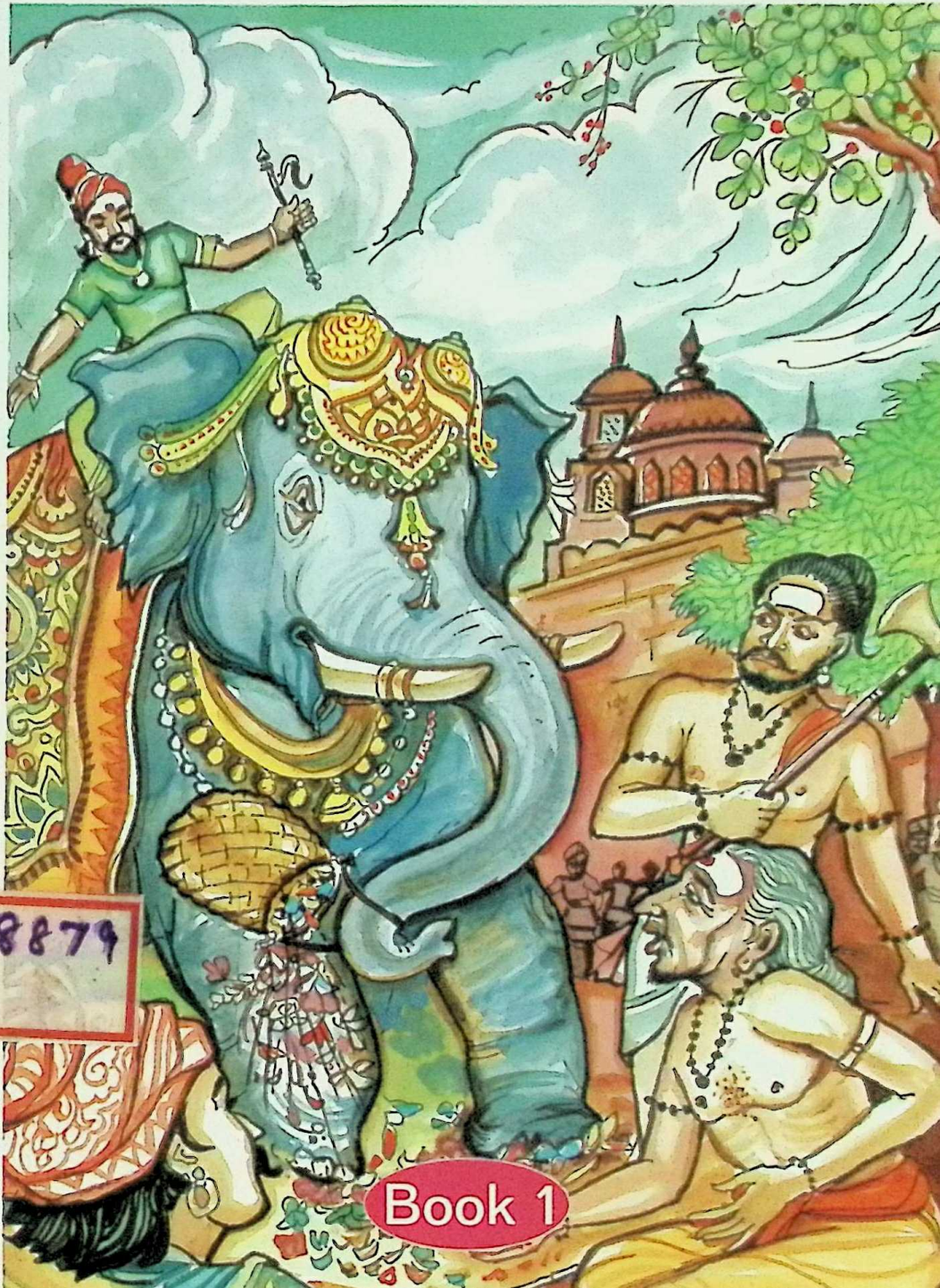


STORIES OF 63 SAINTS OF SOUTH INDIA



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Book 1

STORIES OF **63 SAINTS** OF SOUTH INDIA

The Stories in this Book

TIRUNEELAKANTA NAYANAR

IYARPAKAI NAYANAR

MARA NAYANAR

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Book 1

TIRUNEELAKANTA NAYANAR

In Chidambaram, in Tamil Nadu, there is a temple known as Ilamaiakkiyar Koil or the 'Temple of the Lord Who Restored Youth'. Here's how the temple got its unusual name.

Once, a potter lived in Chidambaram with his wife. He was a great devotee of Lord Siva, the chief deity of the temple. The potter was greatly moved by the story of how Siva had once swallowed the poison which arose at the churning of the Milky Ocean so that it would not harm the world. But His wife Parvati was scared for Siva's life, and held His throat tight. So the poison stayed right there making the Lord's neck blue, and giving Him the name 'Neelakanta'. The potter took this story to heart and constantly uttered the words 'Tiruneelakantam.' Soon, he himself was called by the same name.

Although Tiruneelakanta was in general a good person, he was not faithful to his wife. One day, he came home after visiting a courtesan and approached his wife. She was furious with him and said, "Beware, Tiruneelakantam, touch us not! Stay away."

The potter was stunned to hear this. Repenting for his earlier sins, he vowed to lead a pure and chaste life and dedicate himself to Lord Tiruneelakanta. From then on, although he continued to live at home, the potter was completely absorbed in serving Siva. Husband and wife grew old but were happy in their common devotion to the Lord. The potter was respected by all, but no one knew of his secret vow of chastity. So Siva decided to reveal his purity to the world.

One day, a Siva Yogi came and stood before the potter. Tiruneelakanta and his wife warmly welcomed him. When he was



leaving, the Yogi handed over a bowl to the potter and asked him to keep it safe till his return. Days passed. Suddenly, one day, the Yogi came and asked for his bowl. The potter searched everywhere but could not find it. Upset, he offered the Yogi a new bowl. But the Yogi refused it, claiming that the potter was lying. The potter said he was innocent and prepared to prove it.

The Yogi asked him to have a bath holding his son's hand. When the potter said that he had no sons, the Yogi asked him to take his wife instead. But the potter said he could not do that because of a vow. He offered to bathe alone and take the vow. But the Yogi would not agree.

Both of them then went to the temple priests. Explaining the situation, the Yogi demanded that the priests make the potter bathe in the temple tank with his wife. So the old potter was forced to explain his secret vow.

Then the priests gave him and his wife a stick; each held one end, and together they took a dip in the tank uttering "Siva, Siva". Miraculously, the old couple emerged from the water with their youth regained! The priests showered flowers on them and blessed them for their devotion to the Lord.

But where was the Siva Yogi? He had disappeared. But in the sky were Lord Siva and Parvati seated on their Nandi. A voice rang out, loud and clear.

"Blessed souls! You have subdued your senses for long. Now live long, fresh and young in mutual love! My grace is with you!"

And so the potter and his wife lived long, made strong by love and faith in the Lord, and ultimately gained salvation.

IYARPAKAI NAYANAR



Iyarpakai was a merchant prince of Poompuhar, the flourishing capital of the Chola country of yore. He devotedly served all those who worshipped Siva. He was especially reverent to those people who smeared holy ash all over their body.

Iyarpakai was charity personified but a little eccentric, too. He behaved peculiarly sometimes and gave away whatever ascetics asked for without a second thought. Lord Siva was very dear to him and, as a consequence, all

Siva devotees were dear to him. He was a very wealthy man but he had no attachment to his wealth. God also gave him plenty of wealth so that he could liberally give it to the poor and the needy.

Iyarpakai's wife was a beautiful woman. She devoted her life in service to her husband. Lord Siva was so pleased with their single-minded devotion that he wanted to test them. He did so by bringing about a sequence of events in their lives.

One day, a sage smeared with holy ash stood before the Nayanar and his wife. They welcomed him with respect and tended to his every need. Finally, when it was time for the sage to leave, Iyarpakai sensed that the holy man wanted something else from him. Since he was hesitating, the Nayanar told him to ask for anything he desired, and it would be his.



The sage then said that he was looking for a lady companion. As Iyarpakai's wife had a sweet disposition, he wanted her for his companion. Iyarpakai readily agreed. He saw nothing strange in the sage's request. Iyarpakai went inside his house and beckoned his wife. He told her of his promise to the sage.

Iyarpakai's wife was bewildered and shocked at this. It wrenched her heart to be given away to a stranger. The poor lady broke down, speaking of Siva's strange ways of punishment. But she went out to the sage as she did not want to disobey her husband. She knew the tenets by which her husband lived - 'Love and Give.'

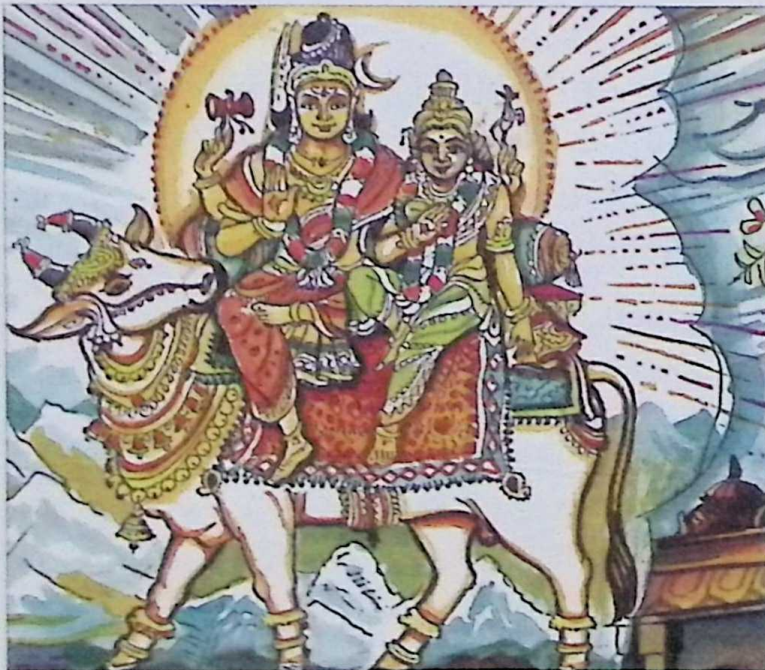
The sage was very pleased at this. But his needs and wants went one step further. He told the Nayanar that if he walked out of the house with another's wife, the whole village would revolt and cause trouble for him. To make it easier for him, he asked Iyarpakai to arm himself and become his bodyguard.

Iyarpakai's call towards duty knew no bounds. He readily agreed to this, too. This scandalous news spread across the village like wildfire. The villagers came out in full force and created a furore. They were struck dumb by this behaviour of the Nayanar. Those who served him and respected him were ashamed at this shocking situation. This was a disgrace for the whole village and they would not allow it to happen. They barred the path of the sadhu, saying that they would rather fight unto death than allow this dreadful crime.

Iyarpakai pleaded with the villagers to allow him to carry out his duties. When his pleas fell on deaf ears, he fought each one that came in his way and put to death everyone of them. He won the fight against such a massive crowd by the sheer strength of his devotion.

The sage continued on his way after that. When they reached the boundaries of the village and entered a forest called Saikaadu, the sage thanked Iyarpakai for his help and asked him to go back.

Iyarpakai bowed his head in reverence and turned to go back on his return journey. He had not reached very far, when he heard some heart-rending screams coming from the direction of the forest. He rushed back to the place where he had left his wife and the sage. What a sight was waiting for him! His wife stood all alone gazing at the sky in wonder. It was a celestial sight of Lord Siva and Goddess Parvati riding on a bull and soaring towards the heavens. The Lord and His Consort showered their blessings on the couple as they bowed their heads in adoration. To make them even happier, the Lord took the couple to His heavenly abode and gave them their rightful place at His side. Celestials showered petals and sang hymns in praise of Iyarpakai and his wife, a couple who had selflessly served Siva.



MARA NAYANAR

Mara Nayanar was an ardent devotee of Lord Siva. He obtained great pleasure by serving Lord Siva's devotees with great dedication. He was a true Vellala, honest and industrious. Mara Nayanar owned lands and was a keen farmer who had been blessed with plenty by Divine Grace. He realised that God appeared in the form of human beings and his pure and generous heart was big enough to encompass all who served the Lord. He was a perfect host to his guests, whom he revered. His dutiful wife was an embodiment of chaste virtues, and together they strove to please their guests. Since he had the Lord's blessings, he enjoyed peace and plenty like Kubera, the Lord of Riches.

Lord Siva wanted to test Mara's love for Him and prove his large-heartedness to the world. Mara's affluence began to decrease as a consequence of poor yields from his fields. He was reduced to penury. But his state of poverty did not deter him from his daily pursuit of hospitality. He willingly gave everything he could. The final, bitter test awaited him.

It was a winter night. At that dark hour, there was torrential rain. Nature was grim and ominous. Mara and his wife had had no food for the past few nights.

At that moment, a hungry ascetic called at Mara's home. He was old and trembling from the cold. Mara was the perfect host even then. He wiped the ascetic's feet, gave him dry clothes and made him rest in a warm corner.

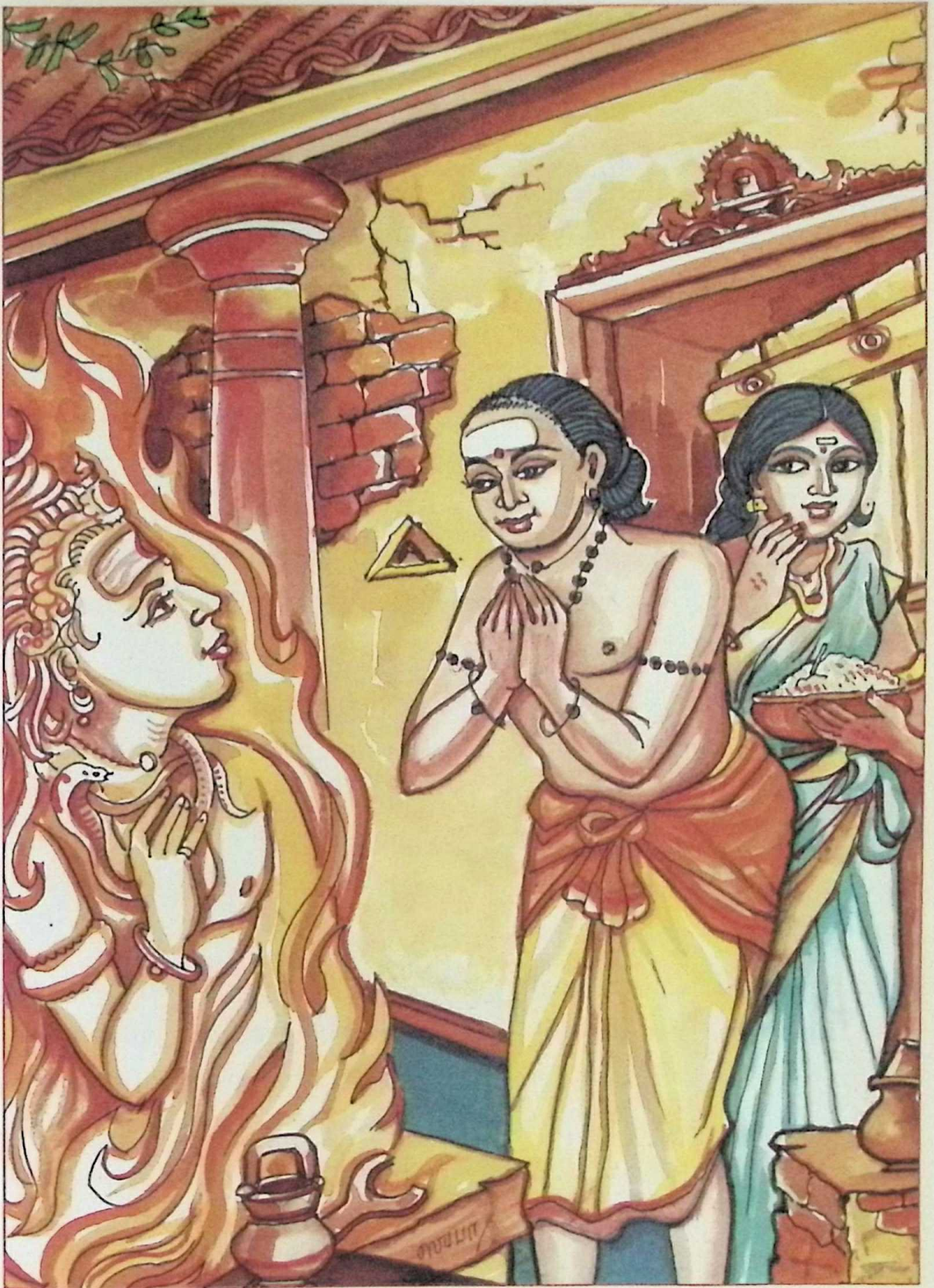
He then went to his wife, and expressed his dismay that there was no food in the house. The ever-dutiful wife bade him collect the grain that would have half-germinated on their land. She vowed to make the best use of the grain and provide good food to the guest. Mara went into the fields, braving the flashes of lightning, the roll of thunder and the pouring rain.

He gathered the paddy seeds washed together by the flowing rain water, filled his basket and hurried home. As there was no firewood, Mara tore a wooden rafter from the roof to light the fire. He then went to the backyard and brought some tender greens. His wife prepared a variety of dishes with their limited resources. Mara then invited the hungry guest to supper. He humbly requested him to forgive them their shortcomings and accept the simple fare. He uttered the name of the Lord, whom he saw in his guest.

A brilliant light dazzled Mara and his wife. There stood before them, not the humble guest, but the Lord Himself in all His splendour, on the Rishaba (bull), along with Uma of the fragrant tresses.

The Lord praised His faithful devotee and invited them to Kailash to live in everlasting bliss and felicity. Even Kubera, the Lord of Wealth, was to stand sentinel to them.

Even adversity did not shake the staunch faith of Mara Nayanar and his wife, who remained dutiful and hence enjoyed eternal bliss.

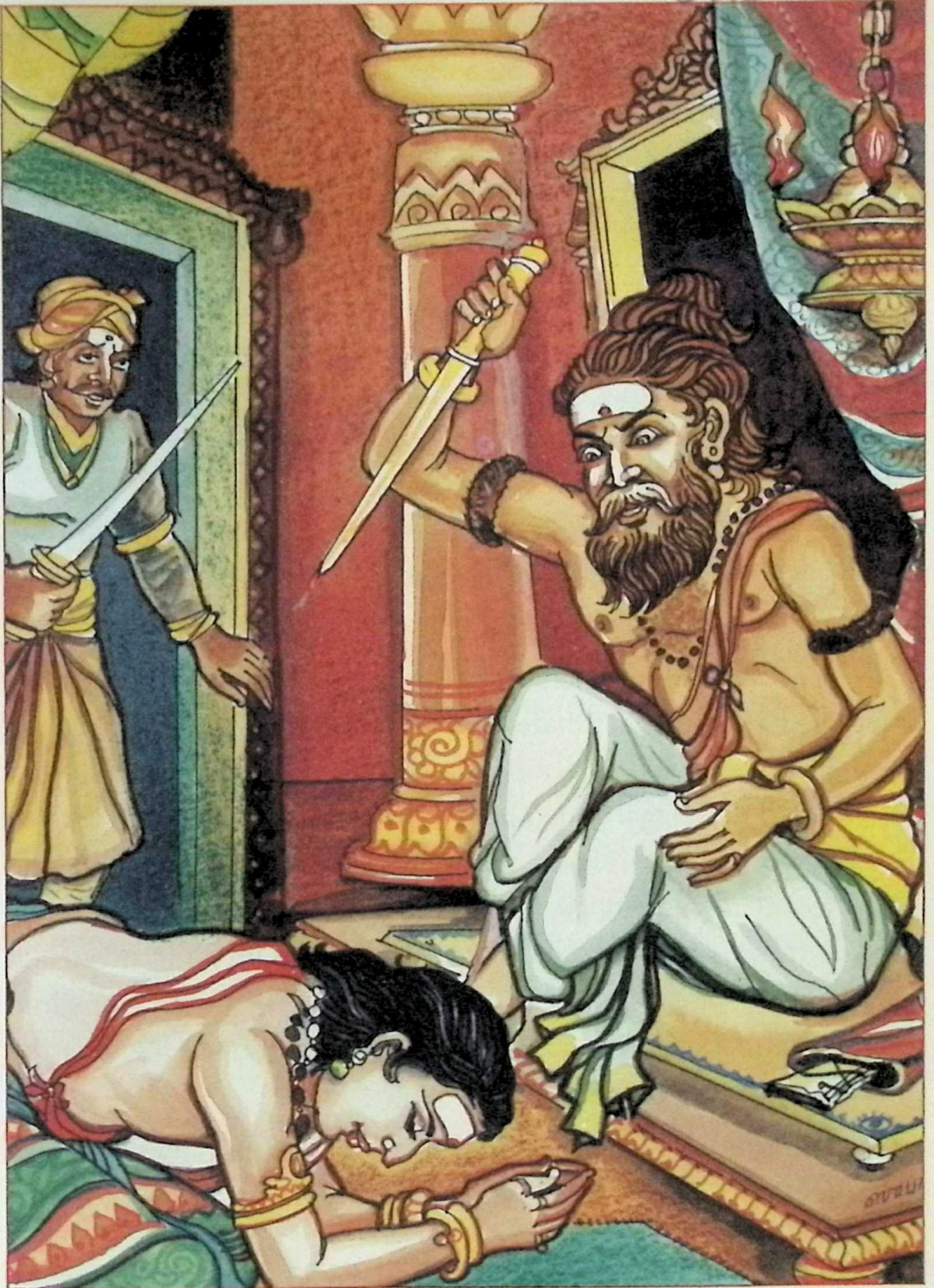


MEIPORUL NAYANAR

Meiporul Nayanar was a Siva Bhakta whose life was dedicated to Truth, which is God. He was the king of Cheti Nadu, with his capital at Tirukovilur. The truth of the Vedas was apparent in his life and he served his subjects with great love and justice. Worship at temples was done according to the rules of the Agamas. Holy hymns were sung and dances performed with religious fervour to the accompaniment of temple bells. His devotion to God was such that he did not differentiate between the sincere devotees of the Lord and ash-coated hypocrites, who merely muttered "Siva, Siva". It was enough that they uttered the name of the Lord. He willingly saw the Lord in their form. He was known far and wide for his dauntless action in the battlefield.

The neighbouring chief Muktinathan challenged him several times, but Meiporul Nayanar routed and disgraced him. Muktinathan understood that it would be impossible to defeat Meiporul in the open battlefield. So he disguised himself as a Siva Bhakta, smearing his body with ash, and set forth to put into effect a cunning plan.

He concealed a sharp dagger and a holy book on the Agamas in silk. The traitor thus attired in holy robes entered the palace. The guards had been instructed to allow Siva Bhaktas to enter the palace freely. He approached the bed-chamber of the king. The faithful guard Dhattan stopped him, saying that he should select a more suitable time to meet the king as he was asleep.



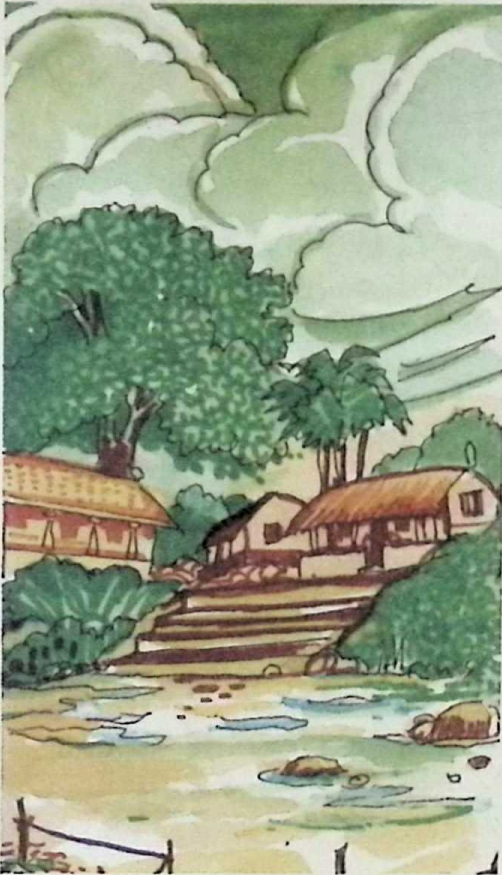
The traitor declared that he had vital instructions to impart to the king and asked him to stand aside. Dhattan, not to be deterred, kept a keen watch over him from behind. The queen saw the traitor and, believing him to be a holy man, arose at once and woke up the king.

As the king saluted the rogue, the traitor said that he had an Agama revealed to him by the Lord and he would read it to him only when the king was alone. The queen left the chamber and the king was alone with the impostor. When the king bowed to him, the traitor drew his hidden sword and dealt a deadly blow to him. Dhattan, who had been alert, pounced on the assassin like a tiger. But the dying Meiporul protested saying that the traitor was one of them and should not be harmed. It was his royal command that he should be escorted safely outside the city.

The tragic news shocked the people. Deeply angered, they demanded revenge but Dhattan reiterated the royal command that the traitor should not be harmed. He safely led the traitor outside the city ramparts. The dying king beamed with happiness and said that his subjects should respect Saivism and those who carried its symbols with unquestioning faith in the Lord. With every breath they should utter the five-lettered mantra 'Namasivaya'. With these last words, he meditated on the Lord Nataraja. The Lord appeared before him, showered His Grace upon him and gave his soul the everlasting bliss of dwelling at His feet.

Meiporul became a martyr who performed his duty till the end by protecting even his murderer only because he carried the Lord's symbols!

VIRANMINDA NAYANAR

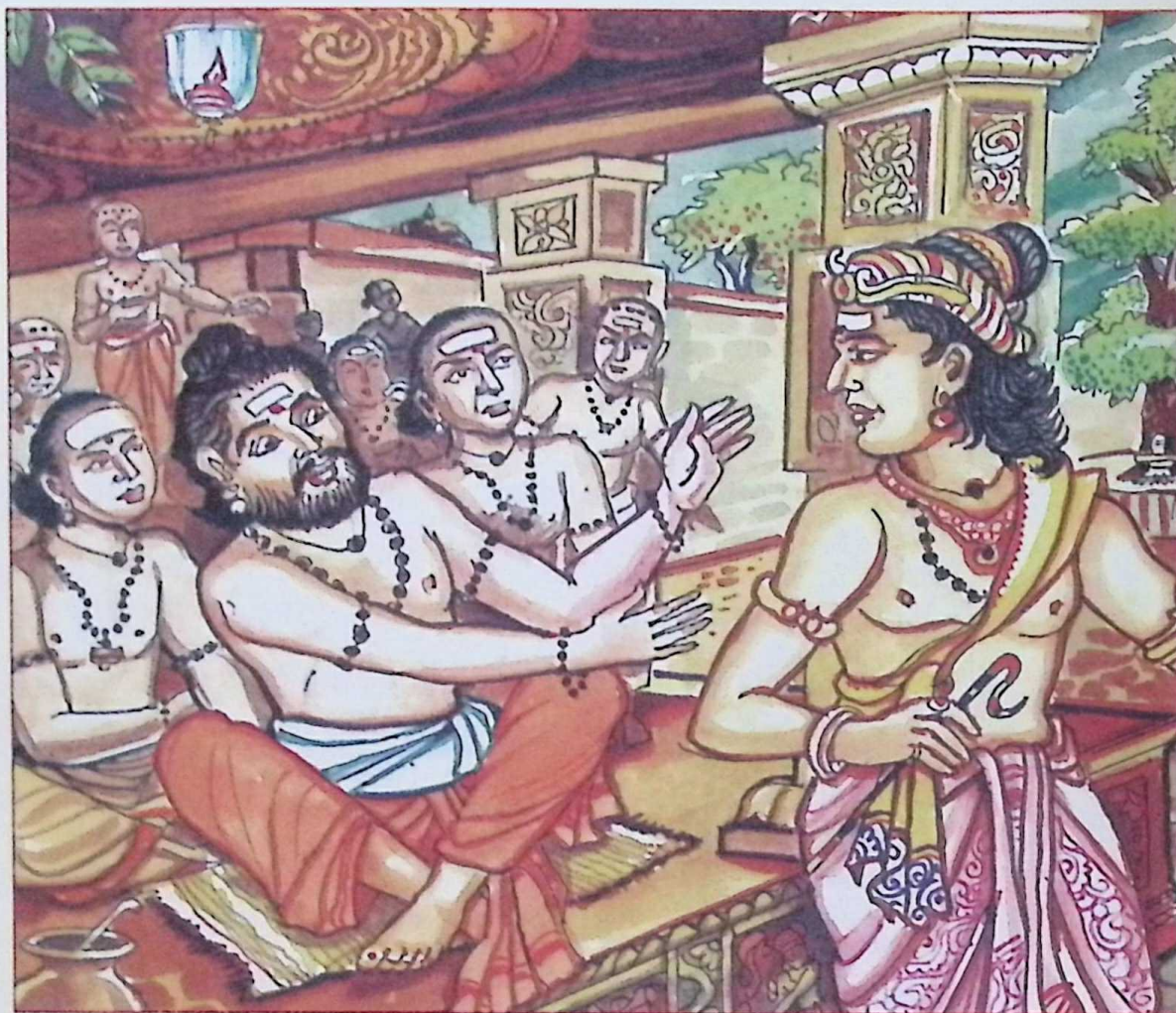


Senkundrur was a fertile hamlet amidst the hills on the west. The pretty, pearl-teethed damsels of the village sorted out and strung together in order of their merit, pearls provided by the turbulent sea. A pious Vellala, Viranmindar lived in the village, having renounced material pleasures and completely devoted himself to the service of the Lord.

Once, he visited the Tiru Arur Temple and joined the big assembly of holy saints who ardently sang of God's glory in the thousand-pillared hall,

Devasiriyam. One day, Saint Sundarar visited the Arur temple and went straight to the sanctum of Thyagaraja without paying obeisance to the saints who had gathered there to sing the praise of the Lord. Viranmindar felt slighted and told Sundarar that he was hereafter banished from the company of holy men and the feet of God.

Saint Sundarar was stunned by the angry reprimand and calmly answered that it had not been his intention to incur the wrath of the holy assembly by insulting them. He had felt unworthy of such exalted company and had hence moved away.



Sundarar offered to sing their praise inspired by the Divine Will.

After a brief prayer to the supreme, Sundarar dedicated an awe-inspiring garland of verses popularly known as Tiru Thondatokai (a garland of ardent devotees of the Lord) to the worshippers of Lord Siva. The whole assembly hailed his religious fervour.

Thus to the great Viranmindar alone we owe the famous 'garland of Saiva saints,' that Sekkizhar sang of in his holy epic. It stands as a testimony to the dedication and complete surrender to the Lord, the inspiration for Sundarar.

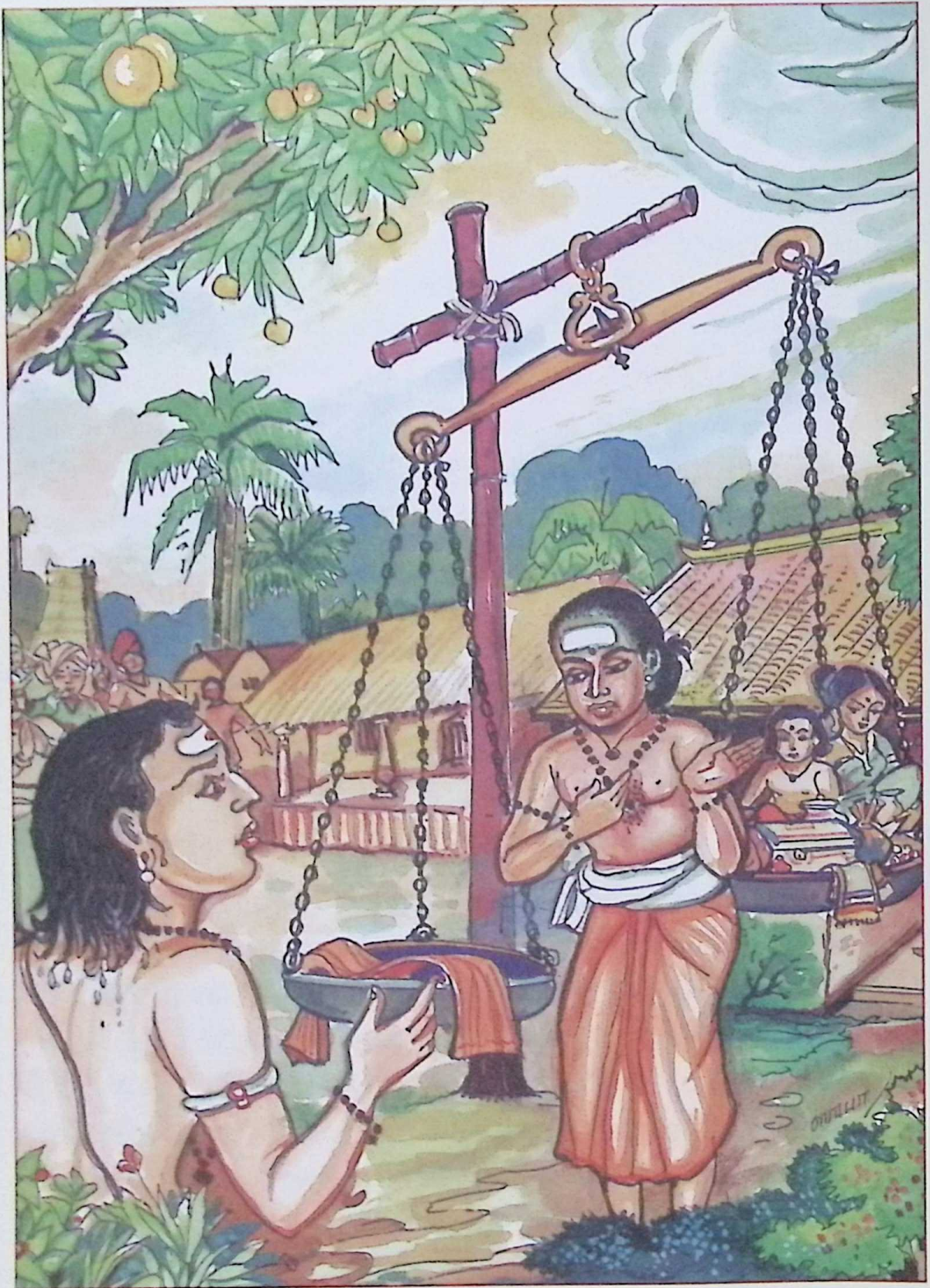
AMARNITHI NAYANAR

Pazhayarai was a picturesque village on the banks of the Cauvery river in the land of the Cholas. Amarnithi Nayanar, a native of this village, was a rich merchant who sold gold, pearls, silks and textiles. His growing prosperity made him generous and compassionate. He was a deeply religious man who knew the joy of giving without restraint.

The Nayanar believed that God had appointed him a trustee to the wealth that was actually His. So he spent his wealth in celebrating festivals in honour of Manikandar at Tirunallur and gave freely to a *mutt*. It was his habit to give devotees loincloths every day. On one festive occasion, Amarnithi stayed in the *mutt* with his family and engaged in charitable works.

One day, God appeared before him in the form of a simple young man. His only worldly possessions were a deer skin to sit on and a staff to which were tied a bag to keep ash, a loincloth and holy grass.

The Nayanar welcomed him with great love and joy and offered him the hospitality of the *mutt*. The young man accepted the Nayanar's offer, saying that he was famed for his generosity to the poor. Giving the Nayanar his loincloth, he asked him to keep it safely till he returned from a dip in the Cauvery. Accordingly, the Nayanar kept the loincloth in a safe place. When the young man returned from his bath, a sumptuous feast awaited him. The Nayanar offered to wipe the young man's feet. He also offered him dry clothes but the young man only wanted his loincloth returned.



The Nayanar went to fetch the loincloth but it had mysteriously disappeared. The bewildered Nayanar offered new clothes to the young man, but he was furious and accused him of having stolen his property. Begging for forgiveness, the Nayanar offered him silks, gems and a fine loincloth. The young man was pacified and said that he was willing to take an equal measure of gifts after weighing the loincloth in a balance. On one pan was placed the loincloth, and the Nayanar's gifts of silks, gems and jewels on the other. But the scale with the gifts went up.

The Nayanar realised the mystic power of the young man and pleaded with him to be allowed to sit on the pan with the gifts with his family. The young man agreed and the pious family walked round him, praying that if their surrender and devotion to God was flawless, then the scales would balance. Saying "Namasivaya, Namasivaya," the family sat on one pan.

The scales miraculously balanced! Suddenly, a voice was heard from the skies, declaring that the devotees were indeed pure. They had followed God's will and law and had attained Karma Samyam, the balancing of acts and mental purification. Now, they were to ascend to heaven and enjoy eternal bliss. Thus the devotees gained salvation.

Amarnithi Nayanar's sincerity and unflinching devotion to Truth and the Lord brought him justly deserved salvation. He was true to his name 'Amarnithi,' meaning 'eternal justice'. The Siva Bhakta who cultivates great love for the Lord and is virtuous will obtain salvation at the feet of the Supreme.

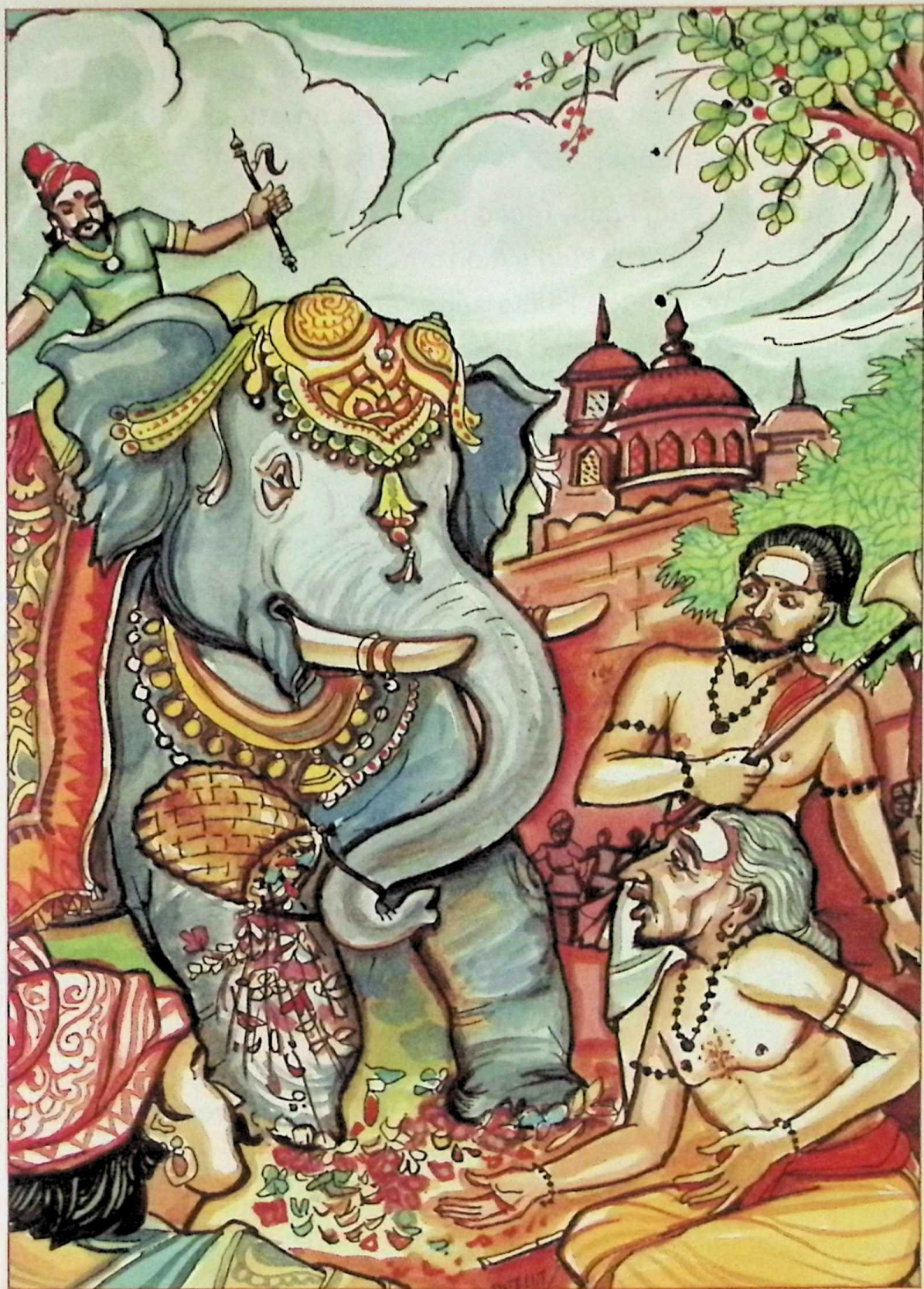
ERIPATHTHA NAYANAR

Karuvur was one of the royal cities of Anabaya Chola, the people's king. Its groves were bright and beautiful. The balmy air was fragrant with the perfume of blooming flowers and enticing fruits. Rows of mansions rose to the sky. Peacocks danced happily in the luxuriant gardens. The victorious flag, with the glittering tiger, fluttered high above the palace. The serene and beautiful temple, 'Aanilai,' with Lord Siva in its sanctum, graced the city.

Eripaththa Nayanar, a staunch devotee of the Lord, was a strong and sturdy man who wielded an axe in defence of the devotees of God. Sivakami Andar, an ardent devotee of Aanilai Sivam, was very old and needed the aid of a stick to walk. It was his practice to wake early, bathe and gather flowers to string into garlands for the temple deities.

One fine morning, the old man, having picked fresh flowers, walked towards the temple. The royal elephant had just been bathed and adorned, and the mahout was directing it towards the palace. The elephant suddenly turned wild, and in a fit of frenzy toppled the basket of flowers and scattered them in the dust. The old man ran after the elephant, feeling wretched because his labour had been in vain. He sobbed bitterly calling Siva, the Lord adorning the elephant skin, to forgive and save him. The mahout turned away, a picture of rude arrogance, as it was the king's elephant.

Eripaththa Nayanar rushed to the old man's rescue and declared that he would avenge the insult to the Lord. He attacked the mad tusker with his axe and, with a single blow, cut off its trunk.



The mahout and his men attacked the Nayanar but they were no match for him. The angry Nayanar dealt them death-blows. Loud complaints were sent to the king, who led an attack with his army chiefs, armed with spears, clubs and iron balls.

The angry king finally faced the Nayanar, who stood before him with his bloody axe. The king's men cried out that he was "the killer". Seeing the Nayanar, the king's anger ebbed away. He commanded his soldiers to withdraw, and asked who had wronged the Nayanar. Eripaththa declared that the king's elephant had, in its madness, committed sacrilege. Moreover, the mahout had been defiant, thus provoking his anger.

The remorseful king bowed to the Nayanar and begged for forgiveness, saying that he was the real sinner, as the elephant was his. He offered his life to atone for the offence to Lord Siva. The king told the Nayanar to cut off his head. Eripaththa was deeply moved by the king's resolve to accept punishment for his elephant's action. He took away the sword from the king and applauded him for not taking offence even after his elephant and the mahout were killed. The Nayanar decided to kill himself for his hasty actions. But before he could chop his own head off, the king snatched the sword from him. A divine voice rang out:

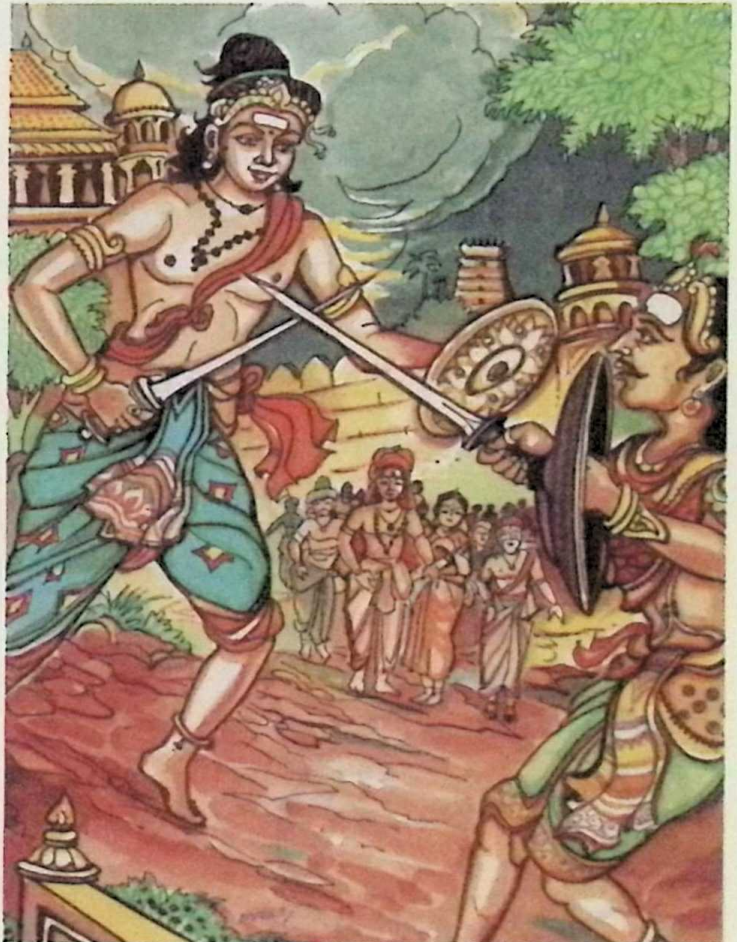
"Both of you have proved your complete devotion to me. Go in peace!"

Miraculously, the elephant and its mahout were restored to life. The Nayanar and the king embraced each other, their hearts full of devotion to Lord Siva. Then Sivakami Andar realised that everything happened according to the Divine Will.

ENATHINATHA NAYANAR

Enathinatha Nayanar was an ardent devotee of Lord Siva. He was an adept swordsman of Einanur in the Chola kingdom. As guileless as a child, he could be a lion in battle. Enathinatha earned his living by teaching princes his art. He lavishly spent his money on Siva's devotees. Atisura, a haughty braggart, was jealous of Enathinatha's talent and fame and devised schemes to defeat him in battle. With an army of thugs, Atisura came to attack Enathinatha. He challenged the Nayanar to fight him, declaring that the winner would become the guru of the army.

The Nayanar, never one to refuse a challenge, willingly came forward to fight. The battlefield rang with the clash of deadly weapons. The enemy was routed like falsehood in the face of truth. Atisura was defeated by the invincible Nayanar. Disgraced and fuming with shame and humiliation, he swore revenge.



The devious Atisura resorted to a trick to defeat the daring Nayanar. He disguised himself as a devotee of Siva by smearing holy ash on his forehead, and challenged the Nayanar to a duel. During the duel, he hid his forehead with his shield, and attacked the Nayanar like a ferocious bull. But he was no match for the skill and expertise of Enathinatha. Soon, the Nayanar had him at his mercy. As the sword neared his throat, the villain quickly lifted his shield and the astonished Nayanar saw his enemy in the guise of a Siva Bhakta, his forehead smeared with ash.

The Nayanar called upon the Lord, pleading his inability to raise his sword against His devotee. The traitor, exulting in his deceit, dealt the noble Nayanar a death-blow. Even in the throes of death, the Nayanar expressed his anguish at having provoked a Siva Bhakta to commit a sin by killing him.

The Nayanar fell a martyr to his faith and love for Siva. He would not bring disgrace to the symbol of Siva even if the enemy wore it. At that instant, the Lord appeared before him, proclaimed his undaunted spirit and courage, that were like an eternal spring, and granted him everlasting bliss at His feet. Even the devious traitor's black heart must have received the purifying blaze of the Nayanar's flaming sacrifice. The Nayanar's nobility and undying love for the Lord have been brought to light by his exemplary life.



STORIES OF 63 SAINTS OF SOUTH INDIA

The *Periyapuranam*, delineating the lives of the 63 famous Saivite saints of Tamil Nadu, known popularly as the "Arupathumoonru Nayanmar," was written by Sekkizhar, a wise chief minister of the Chola kingdom. Since then, these stories have been narrated by countless generations of scholars in the temples of Tamil Nadu, and retold in both Tamil and English.

The devotion of these saints to Lord Siva was all encompassing. They were prepared to sacrifice not only their material wealth but even their lives and those of their families in the service of the Lord and His devotees. The numerous verses composed by the 63 saints in praise of Lord Siva in the various temples of Tamil Nadu have stood the test of time. The life histories of these saints serve as a role model to young people, and speak of the importance of devotion to duty and commitment to society.

The present stories have been retold in simple English for the benefit of young readers in India and abroad by Kalpana Ramani, Asha Kannan and Bhama Chandran, and edited by Lakshmi Venkataraman. Every story is brought to life in the evocative illustrations of Subha. This book is the first in a series of eight volumes envisaged by the Koviloor Adhinam Children's Book Trust.

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